

PERSPECTIVES

Our veterans deserve better

What is the responsibility of those still in uniform?

BY CHARLES D. ALLEN

In the summer of 1932, amid the Great Depression, several thousand veterans of World War I gathered in the nation's capital to express their discontent with the U.S. government. In particular, they came to protest the failure of Congress to pass legislation to provide veterans with emergency relief. This Bonus Army camped in Washington for 10 weeks, growing to 24,000 people before it was finally evicted by federal troops after two protesters died in clashes with Capitol Police.

Nearly 80 years later, our nation is encountering a similar level of disaffection. The ostensible value of military service is matched neither by societal action nor by the reality of the conditions our veterans face. That military veterans joined ranks of "the 99 percent" in the Occupy Wall Street movement and exercised their rights to speak out indicates their concern.

This situation will likely worsen as the force shrinks. In January, senior officials announced cuts of about 100,000 Army and Marine Corps service members; over the next five years, defense specialists estimate, military end strength may shrink by up to 200,000 personnel.

Our active-duty, reserve-component and former service members are closely watching the Capitol Hill budget debates. They realize that health care and entitlement programs may be in jeopardy. Justifiably, they fear that reductions in the defense budget will lead to more hardship. It is easy to understand why those who have served may perceive an erosion of the commitment to take care of our veterans.

Much of this is out of the hands of those who still wear the uniform. Many decisions are in the realm of the political, where serving military personnel may not tread. Others are properly the responsibility of civilian agencies and organizations. But there is much that can be done, and much that must be done.

VETERANS AT RISK

Clearly, our society holds those who serve in uniform in high esteem. Yet returning veterans are at greater risk than their nonserving counterparts for unemployment, homelessness

and suicide. In too many cases, their American dreams have become nightmares.

And the risk may be higher for the current generation than ever before. A 2011 report by the Pew Research Center, "War and Sacrifice in the Post-9/11 Era: The Military-Civilian Gap," found that 44 percent of post-9/11 veterans reported difficulty readjusting to civilian life, up from 25 percent of veterans who served in earlier eras.

Today, people who leave military service return to a society that is struggling economically and has an unemployment rate between 8 percent and 9 percent. Many are from the junior ranks, bringing less skill and less experience to the competition for civilian jobs, and this will be more evident during the coming drawdown. Already, the unemployment rate for veterans is higher than the national average. In 2011, the unemployment rate for former junior enlisted soldiers was reported at 36 percent. The Labor Department reported the 2011 average unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans stood at 12.1 percent and that nearly 21 percent of all veterans under the age of 24 were jobless. Members of the National Guard and Reserve are not immune: In 2011, 13 percent of them were unemployed; their junior enlisted unemployment rate was reported at 23 percent.

Some will say that veteran unemployment is nothing new and is to be expected after the conclusion of major conflicts. Perhaps, but the figures on homelessness among veterans are more disturbing yet. The departments of Veterans Affairs (VA) and Housing and Urban Development jointly reported to Congress that 19 percent of the nation's homeless adult population is veterans. More than 75,000 veterans have no shelter on any given night. The distressing reality is that veterans are more than twice as likely to be homeless as nonveterans are. Women and minority service members are even more likely to be homeless. The most vulnerable are veterans who are 30 or younger: They are almost four times more likely to be on the streets than their nonserving civilian counterparts.

Many of these homeless veterans are victims of drug abuse and mental illness related to post-traumatic stress disorder. Managers of official shelters report that more than half of homeless veterans they care for are disabled. In 2008, Rand estimated that one-third of the nearly 1.7 million veterans who

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ARMY

Police officers attempt to remove Bonus Army marchers from government property in Washington, D.C. Thousands of World War I veterans, many of them unemployed, gathered in 1932 to demand immediate payment of promised bonuses that were not scheduled to be paid until 1945.

have deployed since 9/11 suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury or depression.

The suicide statistics may be most startling of all. In 2010, VA estimated that 20 percent of suicide victims in America are former service members. Through 2007, post-9/11 Army veterans were 21 percent more likely to die from suicide than the general population.

We must not ignore this compelling evidence that we are breaking the faith with our current generation of military veterans, especially those most vulnerable.

Beyond the gap in condition, there is a gap in perception. Among the nonveterans surveyed for the Pew report, some 83 percent acknowledged that military personnel and their families have made many sacrifices in the past decade, but only 26 percent describe veterans' sacrifices as unfair; 70 percent considered these hardships as "just part of being in the military." It is easy to infer that the nonveterans surveyed generally do not feel an obligation to address the problems of former service members.

Veterans' trust that the nation will care for them is as important as the nation's trust that our military will act in accord with established constitutional principles. DoD leaders establish these expectations with every recruit, that they have joined a noble calling and that their service will be honored.

Accordingly, DoD must keep the faith with military members and their families. The choice of veterans to don the uniform and serve in an era of persistent conflict — answering the nation's call — should not lead to undue hardship and disadvantage when they return home.

Much as our leaders decided to surge our military force to redress unacceptable operational conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan, we need a comparable surge of commitment to address the current conditions of disadvantaged veterans and to prepare for the new wave of veterans that will come as our military force draws down. Effective programs will require collaboration among federal, state and local governments, along with the active support of business and civic organizations.

RECENT PROGRESS

There has been some recent progress along these lines. Elements of the U.S. government have acknowledged the plight of post-9/11 veterans and offered several initiatives over the past year. In November, Congress passed and President Obama signed into law the VOW to Hire Heroes Act of 2011. This legislation will provide tax credits to employers of veterans with

VETERANS *continued on Page 35*

VETERANS *continued from Page 29*

service-connected disabilities as well those who hire veterans who have been unemployed in the short term (more than four weeks) and the long term (more than six months). An important provision in the act is the mandatory participation in Transition Assistance Programs to prepare separating service members for the civilian job market.

Another improvement, included in the National Defense Authorization Act of 2012, was the extension of rights under the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act for members of the National Guard who conduct domestic homeland security missions.

The armed services, along with VA, are instituting programs to evaluate, treat and provide continuity of medical care for separating service members.

VA has targeted homelessness in its three-year pilot, Veterans Homelessness Prevention Demonstration Program, and created the National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans. The VA has also partnered with the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Labor Department and local community agencies to achieve the goal of eliminating veterans homelessness by 2015 — a daunting task.

Finally, senior uniformed leaders

have begun to include veteran issues into their strategic communication with congressional testimonies and in media engagements.

But more must be done.

AN OPPORTUNITY

Why should currently serving military members care? Well, when the veterans were *our* service members, leaders (commissioned and noncommissioned officers) told them how much we cared for them and how much the nation valued their sacrifices. We must be true to the espoused commitment to continue to honor their service.

Moreover, we bear partial responsibility for creating the civil-military gap, and therefore some responsibility for healing it. Last May, then-Joint Chiefs Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen spoke to West Point cadets about the lack of engagement between the U.S. public and its military members.

"But I fear they do not know us," he said. It is a sentiment that cuts both ways.

In taking pride in being part of "the other 1 percent," our military members have isolated themselves from the larger society. We must acknowledge that the military has been comfortably ensconced in its protective bubble, separated from the daily challenges faced by our citizens.

But we have an opportunity. The end of wars means fewer deployments and lower operational tempo for many service members stationed at installations within the U.S. That allows ample chances, and an obligation, to take part in civil society. Officers and NCOs should join local civic organizations, such as Rotary; participate in community town halls and school board meetings; and be involved in volunteer service organizations. Partaking in such nonpartisan activities reaffirms that service members are citizens, gives firsthand awareness of societal concerns, and makes them partners in caring for others in their community. This will promote visibility of not only serving members but also provides a venue to address reintegration of veterans into local communities.

Recruiting is another reason. As we seek to sustain the all-volunteer force of 2020, we must be concerned about the stories current veterans will pass along. We might expect them to relate with pride tales of great camaraderie and accomplishments while in military service. But many new veterans will speak of their struggles with reintegration, joblessness, homelessness and hopelessness.

If the nation breaks its covenant with our veterans, the military itself will face an uncertain future. **AFJ**

MTTP *continued from Page 24*

ALSA has already begun looking into digital versions of its products. The center is no longer printing physical copies of its Air Land Sea Bulletin (ALSB), which publishes three issues a year, each filled with articles submitted from war fighters on a given theme. The ALSB now exists solely in digital form.

MTTP developers should also consider reaching out to the services' centers that produce 3-D visualizations and scenarios. These centers use correlated terrain and 3-D models for operational and institutional training, based on current combat conditions. Converting portions of certain MTTPs to animated visualizations that complement vignettes may help make them more compelling. However, with an annual budget of less than \$250,000 and an average workload of 10-13 new or revised publications a

year, a center like ALSA must do a cost-benefit analysis on any new initiative.

In the operating force, commanders and operations officers should dedicate resources to ensure (where possible) that their unit TTPs are nested or in compliance with joint doctrine and MTTP. This sounds easy but requires a disciplined process and experienced leaders who understand where the tactical and operational meet.

Finally, ALSA and other service doctrine centers, which already share TTPs with key partners inside and outside the U.S., must make their approval and distribution processes more efficient. Using relevant promotional techniques like YouTube and encouraging the wiki method for revisions can help with process improvements. But nothing helps more than good old-fashioned

leader emphasis and the operational demand that drive requirements.

The new national strategy points the military eastward, and therefore U.S. Pacific Command will conduct exercises to validate emerging operational strategies. Inevitably, that means new tactical interoperability issues in air and sea ops. Quickly capturing the TTP solutions and staffing them for approval will provide war fighters with service-validated approaches. The strategic shift also increases the need to share old and new MTTPs with international partners in the region.

Our vast pool of combat veterans will soon drain, so we must better capture the fruits of their experience and improve the way we share them with the U.S. military, our newest uniformed members and our close international partners. **AFJ**